

DARK DAY IN NEW ENGLAND

BY JOHN NICHOLAS BEFFEL

THEY speak of it as the Dark Day, they whose forebears lived through the soul-stirring experience in 1780, echoes of which have come down through so many New England generations. It was a day when countless thousands turned fearful eyes toward a sunless sky, while nameless terror clutched at their throats. What awful portent was this? What grim visitation was at hand?

Histories deal with that curious episode only in fragmentary fashion. Apparently no comprehensive article about it has appeared heretofore in any periodical. But some details can be dug up in the yellowed files of local newspapers, in old diaries and unpublished letters.

Darkness invaded the Northeast without warning on Friday, the nineteenth of May. Like a boundless inky pall, it entered Connecticut from the Southwest about ten in the morning and spread swiftly across the state into the lands that are now Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

Cows left their pastures and plodded homeward to be milked. Birds and barnyard fowls sought their perches and drooped their heads in sleep. Dogs whined and put tails between their legs.

People spoke in hushed voices. They lighted candles in the houses, and as the blackness grew deeper toward noon great numbers of them fell upon their knees at home or in the churches and sent up fervent prayers. From the Hudson River to the seaward side of New England men and women asked themselves the dread question, "Is this the Day of Doom, when the dead shall rise and all men shall be judged?"

Those who sought comfort from their spiritual leaders found only harsh admonitions. "No unrepentant sinner can escape the wrath of an avenging God!" Whereto congregations, in swelling chorus, replied "Amen!" Yet they prayed that the terrible accounting which loomed near might be averted. "Heavenly Father," clergy and laymen joined in pleading, "if it

be Thy will, let this cup pass from us!"

William Pynchon, lawyer and leading citizen of Salem, Massachusetts, then a community of more than six thousand souls, observed that before noon

The cocks began to crow as in the night; people in the streets grew melancholy; and fear seized upon all except sailors. They went hallooing and frolicking in the streets, and were reprov'd in vain. They cried out to the ladies as they pass'd: "Now you may take off your rolls and high caps and be damned!"

Many of the townspeople turned to Dr. Nathaniel Whittaker for guidance. They crowded into the Third Church, where he had often assailed those who opposed his insistence upon the Presbyterian forms. Here was new opportunity to speak out, and he made the most of it. His text was taken from Amos VIII. 9-10: "*I will darken the earth in the clear day. . .*" He held, Mr. Pynchon recorded, that this great darkness was due to "the immediate act of God for people's extortion and other sins, and enumerated them." Recalling the utterances of the prophet Amos, Dr. Whittaker dwelt upon "God's judgement upon Syria, the Philistines, and Israel," related how God had reprov'd Israel "for

oppression, idolatry, and incorrigibleness."

Picturing the wantonness of Israel, and the certainty of its desolation, Dr. Whittaker found parallels in the spiritual condition of countless people of his own day, and he quoted from the prophet:

"And it shall come to pass in that day," saith the Lord God, "that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day. . . . And I will turn all your feasts into mourning, and I will bring up sackcloth upon all loins . . . and I will make it as the mourning of an only son, and the end thereof as a bitter day."

About four in the afternoon, Mr. Pynchon's diary states, it grew somewhat lighter. "In the evening, although the moon was up and full, it was, until 12 o'clock, darker than ever was seen by any."

Terror halted deliberations in the Connecticut Legislature as the city of Hartford was blotted out. A member of the Senate offered a motion to adjourn. But Colonel John Davenport of Stamford leaped to his feet and sharply demurred. "Mr. Speaker, I am against this motion. The Day of Judgment is approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no need of adjourning. If it is, I desire to be found doing my duty. I move that candles be brought and that we proceed."

Shamed by his fortitude, his fellow-members voted to go on with the session.

And there were some women, too, who remained unafraid. Mrs. Robert Bratte, who lived on a farm along the Deerfield River near Whitingham, Vermont, kept her poise and despite the darkness resolutely set out a young apple tree that day. For many years it bore excellent fruit, becoming widely known as "Grandmother's Tree." Likewise Mrs. Edward Augustus Hoke of Salem, wife of the first president of the Massachusetts Medical Society, appears to have been free from undue alarm. She gave little space to the event in her diary:

May 19—Uncommon dark. Began at 10 o'clock a.m. Dined by candle light.

Samuel Thompson of Woburn, also in the Bay State, some time justice of the peace, parish clerk, church deacon, land surveyor, and member of the Legislature, dealt with the blackout in his journal:

It began to grow dark between 9 and 10, and the darkness increased by degrees until after 12, when it was darker than usual on a starlight night. Candles were lighted at midday and the people were astonished and affrighted, calling to mind passages of sacred writ. . . .

Gradually the darkness departed, the deacon wrote, "and the natural day revisited the earth about 3 o'clock in the afternoon." Woburn being only fifteen miles from the ocean, this early clearance of the black shroud from that area suggests the possibility that it was dissipated by a sea wind.

Weather conditions on the momentous day were set forth in an account left by a resident of Norton, another Massachusetts village—supposedly Apollos Leonard. Norton is a few miles from Taunton. The account states:

Thunder in the morning after break of the day; the forenoon very dark, and some rain; the appearance of the clouds very yellow. About 12 o'clock . . . lighted a candle to . . . dine; by about 1 the darkness increased greatly—continued to grow darker until half past 1 o'clock. In the greatest darkness could hardly see R. Leonard's house or barn, and the shadows of persons in the room were as perceptible on the wall by reason of the light of the candle as at any time in the night, and about that time the darkness abated, and 10 minutes after 2 o'clock there was a sprinkle of rain; half after 3 o'clock the darkness entirely dispelled. . . . The yellow appearance after the light ushered in left the horizon very soon.

Young Dr. Samuel Tenney, a physician from Exeter, New Hampshire, was just ending an army furlough, and on that day was visiting his father in Rowley, a dozen miles

south of Newburyport, Mass. Experimenting, he found that a sheet of white paper held a few inches from his eyes was equally invisible with the blackest velvet. Next morning he left on horseback to rejoin his regiment in New Jersey. His inquiries on that journey and after his return from the war indicated that the darkness was deepest in the Massachusetts county of Essex, of which Salem was one of the three seats; in the lower part of New Hampshire, and in the Province of Maine. There were two strata of clouds. He wrote:

In New Jersey the second stratum was observed, but not of any great thickness; nor was the darkness very uncommon. . . . Through the whole extent the lower stratum had an uncommon brassy hue. . . . This gradual increase of the darkness from Southwest to Northeast, which was nearly the course of the clouds, affords a pretty good argument in favor of the supposition that they were condensed by two strong currents of winds blowing in opposite directions. To these two strata of clouds we may, without hesitation, impute the extraordinary darkness of the day.

The editors of the *Connecticut Gazette* in New London in their issue of May 26 acknowledged their "incapacity of describing the phenomenon which appeared in this town on Friday last, and shall therefore leave it to the astronomers, whose more particular business

it is." But diligent hunting by the present writer has turned up comment by only a single member of that profession. In an age when the term "philosophy" was often used to denote physics, or natural philosophy, Sir William Herschel, the British astronomer, dismissed the subject by saying:

The Dark Day in Northern America was one of those wonderful phenomena which will always be read of with interest, but which philosophy is at a loss to explain.

II

Some of the guesses about the cause of that blackout, voiced by awed spectators, included an eclipse of the sun, a transit of Venus or Mercury upon the sun's disc, a blazing star supposed to have come between the earth and the sun, and some of the credulous even entertained a rumor that "a mountain obstructed the rays of the sun's light."

The most plausible explanation, however, and one offered by several commentators, was that the blackness resulted from forest fires, "the smoke of which was borne through the upper regions of the atmosphere, to fall when it came to a locality of less buoyant air, down to the lower strata." On that day "the smell of burning leaves"

was noticed by a reader signing himself Viator, who wrote to the *Boston Gazette* about it.

Observations by Dr. Samuel Williams, professor of mathematics and philosophy at Harvard University, strongly support the forest-fire theory. The darkness seemed to appear first in the southwest, he recalled in an account written for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and published in 1785:

It was evident as far east as Falmouth; we hear of it reaching the furthest parts of Connecticut, and Albany. To the southward it was observed all along the seacoasts, and to the north, as far as our settlements extend. . . . For several days the air appeared to be full of smoke and vapor. . . . Early in the morning the weather was cloudy; the sun was but just visible through the clouds, and appeared of a deep red, as it had for several days before.

The Harvard professor notes that at Ipswich a gentleman found a light scum over the rainwater which people then saved in tubs. Rubbing it between thumb and finger, the Ipswich gentleman found it to be "the black ashes of burnt leaves; the water gave the same sooty smell which we have observed in the air." In this part of America, Professor Williams pointed out,

it is customary to make large fires in the woods for the purpose of clearing the lands in the new settlements. This was the case this spring in a much

greater degree than is common. . . . In addition to what arises from evaporation, and those exhalations which are constant and natural, a much larger quantity of vapor arose from those large and numerous fires, which extended all around our frontiers. As the weather had been clear, the air heavy, and the winds small and variable for several days, the vapors, instead of disappearing, must have been rising and constantly collecting in the air, until the atmosphere became highly charged with an uncommon quantity of them.

Large stretches of dark scum floated on the surface of the Merrimack River on that nineteenth of May. Dr. Williams examined specimens of this. It was kindred to the film cited by the Ipswich man — "the black ashes of burnt leaves, without any sulphureous mixtures." And he told of a letter from Dover, New Hampshire, reporting that small birds had been found dead from suffocation.

Next day the sun shone, and New England's people began to breathe freely again. But thousands of them had been profoundly stirred. Individually and in groups the God-fearing gave heartfelt thanks for having been spared from the indefinable horror that had hung over them. Henceforth, they vowed, they would lead better lives and would strive to be worthy of living in a sunlit world.